Prologue
The War in Europe
1914–1917

The event that set off war in Europe came in late June 1914 at Sarajevo, when a fanatical Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. In other times and under different conditions, this act might not have been enough to catapult the world into the most widespread and costly conflict man had yet known, one that would eventually put under arms 65 million men from thirty countries representing every continent. Yet as matters stood that summer of 1914, Europe was a tinderbox awaiting a spark, an armed camp with two rival power blocs. There was at first the Triple Alliance composed of Germany, Austria, and Italy. On the other side, the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France gradually merged with the Dual Alliance of France and Russia to become the Triple Entente. With the defection of Italy, Germany and Austria became the Central Powers, which Bulgaria and Turkey eventually joined. The Triple Entente became, with the addition of Italy, the nucleus of the Allied Powers.

Despite some halfhearted efforts to localize the dispute over the assassinated prince, since Russia backed Serbia and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany promised Austria full support, the only real question was when the war was to begin. The answer to that came on July 28, when Austria declared war on Serbia. As Russia began its ponderous mobilization process to back the Serbs, Germany rushed to strike first.

Germany's location between Russia and France dictated for the Germans a two-front war. To meet this contingency, the German General Staff had laid plans to defeat France swiftly before the Russians with their ponderous masses could fully mobilize, then to shift forces rapidly to the east and destroy the Russians at will.

The maneuver designed to defeat the French was the handiwork of Germany's gifted former Chief of Staff, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, who lent his name to the plan. Deducing that the French would attack in Alsace and Lorraine, Schlieffen proposed to trap them in a massive single envelopment, a great scythe-like movement through the Low Countries and into northern France, then west and south of Paris. Schlieffen was prepared to give ground on his left wing in Alsace-Lorraine to keep the French armies occupied until a powerful right wing—the tip of the scythe—could complete the envelopment. (*See Map 1.*)

The German staff modified the Schlieffen Plan continually between its creation and the start of the war, but one of the plan's major faults was in the area of logistics. Such a massive movement of troops and horses quickly moved beyond available railroad support and could not be sustained. The troops at the tip of the spearhead would have to slow down due to supply problems before they would be able to encircle Paris. Yet the maneuver achieved such surprise that by late August the French and British armies were in full retreat and the threat to Paris was so real that the French government abandoned the city. Only a hastily arranged French counterattack against an exposed German flank saved Paris. That action afforded time for main British and French forces to turn, halt the Germans at the Marne River east of Paris, and drive them back to the Aisne River, forty miles to the north.

The landscape from Switzerland to the sea soon was scarred with opposing systems of zigzag, timber-revetted trenches, fronted by tangles of barbed wire.

As stalemate developed along the Aisne, each side tried to envelop the northern flank of the other in successive battles that by October had extended the opposing lines all the way to the Belgian coast. Allied and German armies alike went to ground. The landscape from Switzerland to the sea soon was scarred with opposing systems of zigzag, timber-revetted trenches, fronted by tangles of barbed wire sometimes more than 150 feet wide and featured here and there by covered dugouts providing shelter for troops and horses and by observation posts in log bunkers or concrete turrets. Out beyond the trenches and the barbed wire was a muddy desert called No-Man's-Land, where artillery fire had eliminated habitation and vegetation alike, where men in nighttime listening posts strained to hear what the enemy was about, and where rival patrols clashed.

Eventually both sides would realize that they had miscalculated, that the newly developed machine gun and improved indirect-fire artillery had bolstered not the offense but the defense. This development had been presaged—but ignored—in the U.S. Civil War. Principles of war such as maneuver, economy of force, and surprise were seemingly subordinated to the critical principle of mass: masses of men (nearly 2 million Germans and 3 million Allied troops); masses of artillery (barrages lasted days and even weeks before an offensive); and masses of casualties (the British and French in 1915 lost 1.5 million men killed, wounded, and missing). Yet through it all the opposing lines stood much as they had at the start. For more than two years they would vary less than ten miles in either direction.

To meet the high cost of the long, deadly struggle, the opposing powers turned more than ever before in history to the concept of the nation in arms. Even Britain, for so many years operating on the theory of a powerful navy and only a small (though highly professional) army, resorted to conscription and sent massive new armies to the continent.

To appease the appetite of the vast armies for munitions, equipment, and supplies, the nations harnessed their mines, factories, and railroads to war production; levied high income taxes; froze wages and prices; and rationed food and other commodities. It was industrialized war on a vast scale never before seen.

On the battlefield, commanders persisted in a vain hope that somehow the stalemate might be ended and breakthrough and exploitation achieved. In April 1915 the Germans released clouds of chlorine gas against a French colonial division on the British sector of the front. The colonials broke, but the Germans were unprepared to exploit the advantage. The first use of poison gas thus was a strategic blunder, wasting total surprise for nothing more than local gains.

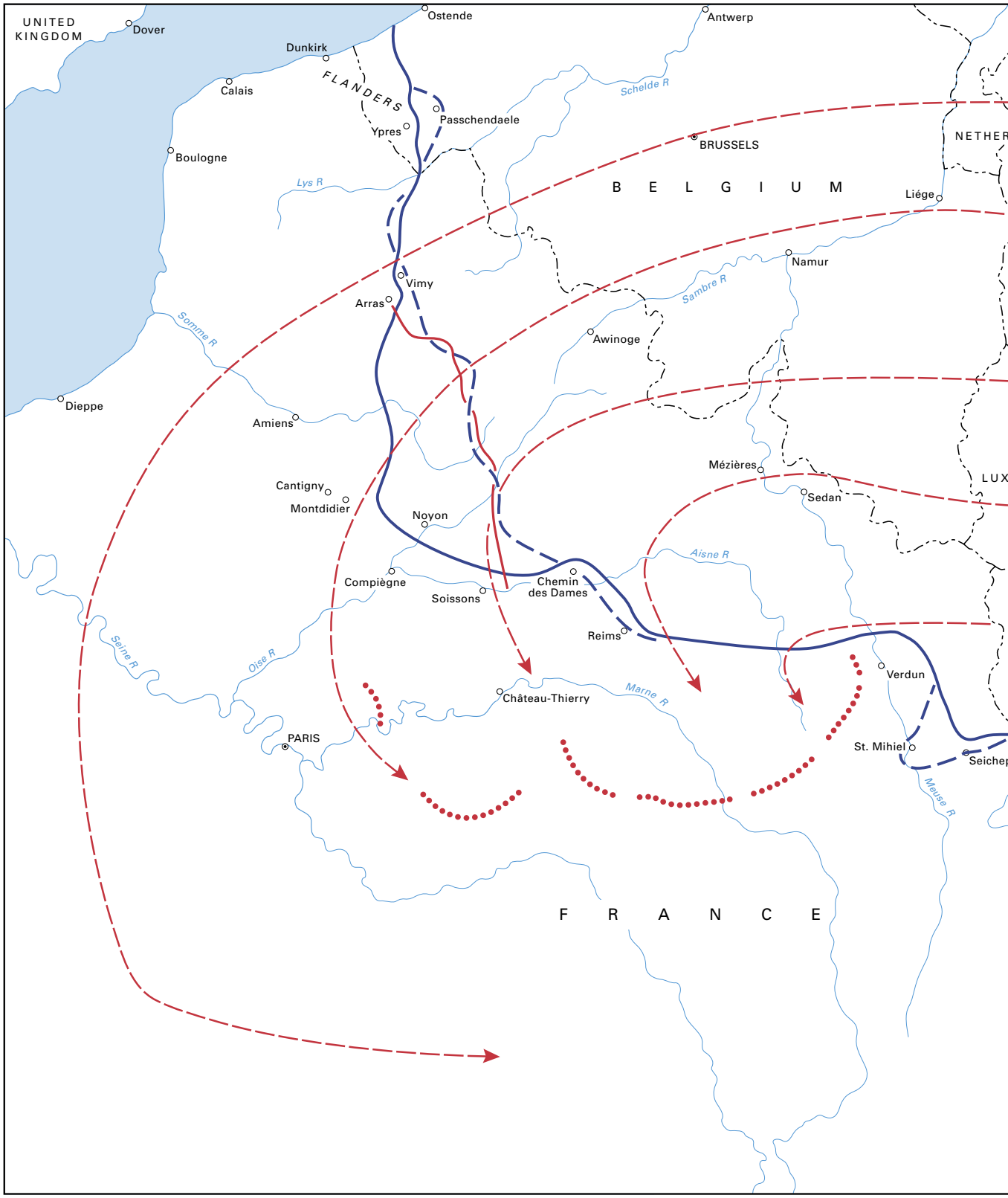
The British similarly blundered the next year, when they also introduced a new weapon prematurely. The tank, an ungainly, ponderous offspring of a marriage of armor with the caterpillar tractor, owed its name to British attempts to deceive the Germans that the vehicle was a water-storage device. In the tank's first commitment in September 1916, thirty-four tanks helped the British infantry advance a painful mile and a half. There would be other attacks in later months involving tanks in strengths close to five hundred, but the critical element of surprise already had passed. Tanks later would prove sufficient to achieve the penetration everybody sought, but they were initially too slow and too subject to mechanical failure to fill the horse cavalry's former role as the tool of exploitation.

For all the lack of decision, both poison gas and tank soon were established weapons, although the Germans were slow to make use of the tank. Another weapon, the airplane, meanwhile found full acceptance on both sides. Used at first primarily for reconnaissance, then as a counterreconnaissance weapon to fight the enemy's planes, and finally as an offensive weapon to attack ground troops, by the time the war ended aircraft had engaged in strategic missions against railroads, factories, and cities, presaging the mass destruction that was to follow in another great war.

The U.S. Army Signal Corps and Aviation

The Aviation Section of the U.S. Army Signal Corps for almost its first decade of existence consisted of one airplane and one pilot, Lt. Benjamin Foulois. Foulois did not know how to fly: he had to learn through trial-and-error and written instruction from the Wright brothers. He later remarked that he was the only person to obtain his pilot's license by correspondence course. Although the Aviation Section had grown to twenty-seven aircraft and fifty-eight pilots by May 1916, it remained minuscule compared to the large and technically superior European aerial fleets engaged in World War I.

Lt. Benjamin Foulois


UNITED KINGDOM
Dover
Ostende
Antwerp
Dunkirk
Calais
FLANDERS
Schelde R
Passchendaele
Ypres
BRUSSELS
NETHER
Boulogne
Lys R
B E L G I U M
Liége
Namur
Vimy
Arras
Sambre R
Somme R
Awinoge
Dieppe
Amiens
Mézières
LUX
Cantigny
Montdidier
Sedan
Noyon
Aisne R
Compiègne
Chemin des Dames
Soissons
Reims
Seine R
Oise R
Verdun
Marne R
Château-Thierry
PARIS
St. Mihiel
Meuse R
F R A N C E

Map 1

WESTERN FRONT

September 1914–March 1918

Schlieffen Plan

Limit of German Advance, Sep 1914

Front Line, Oct 1914

Hindenburg Line

Front Line, Mar 1918

0 50

Miles

Bloody battle followed bloody battle in quick succession in 1915, 1916, and 1917. The names of the battles would echo throughout the ages as symbols of slaughter: Verdun (750,000 casualties), the Somme (1.3 million casualties), Passchendale (350,000 casualties).

By early 1917 bloody stalemate on the Western Front continued and the collapse of the Russians on the Eastern Front threatened to free up millions of Germans for service in the west. In Russia, a spontaneous revolution had erupted in March, prompting the czar to abdicate and initiating a struggle for power between moderate Socialists and the hard-core revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks seized power in the October Revolution and immediately sued for peace. Only the slowness of the negotiations prevented the immediate release to the west of huge numbers of German soldiers.

The worst was still to come. In 1917, after yet another failed French offensive, mutiny broke out in one French regiment and spread swiftly through fifty-four divisions. Many of the French soldiers swore that they would continue to defend their homeland, but they would no longer take part in offensive operations.

More disastrous still were the results of an Austrian offensive launched with German assistance in Italy in the fall. In what became known as the Battle of Caporetto, the Italians in one blow lost 305,000 men; 275,000 of them surrendered as the Italian Army fell back a hundred miles in panic. British and French divisions had to be rushed to Italy to keep the Italians in the war. By the time America was forced to enter the war in April 1917, the disasters on all the fronts had brought the Allies close to collapse.